CHAPTER II

MANN: LIFE AND FORMATIVE INFLUENCES

"I stand between two worlds. I am at home in neither and I suffer in consequence."—Thomas Mann

Thomas Mann was born on June 6, 1875, in Lübeck, North Germany. He hailed from a family of merchants and senators but his mother was from the south and artistically inclined. Thomas grew up with a persistent struggle within himself between his bourgeoisie inheritance and his artistic heritage. The constant strife between these conflicting tendencies bred in him a sense of insecure identity and an ardent desire to belong to what he perceived as the normal, healthy crass majority of society. He was not an academic scholar in the formal sense of the term, losing his interest in studies at fifteen, when he lost his father and gave up institutional schooling. But the amount of learning he did imbibe over the years was astounding and he was the recipient of many academic honours. A tendency to brood and a keenly felt sense of isolation led him to flirt with notions of death by the time he was twenty. By then he had also become acquainted with Schopenhauer and Nietzsche and their interpretation of life laid the basis for Mann's own reading of modern existence. Wagner and Goethe are two other figures who contributed to Mann's development. But Goethe stood in direct opposition to the cynical pessimism of the other
three and Mann continued to have an ambiguous relationship with this stalwart defender of the positive values and significance of life. Goethe took a long time to make any serious dent in the hold that Schopenhauer and Nietzsche had on Mann. As an artist with its co-existent strain of oversensitivity, Mann's family suffered the burden of being unable to cope with life. Two of his sisters and a brother committed suicide and so did his son. It appears that creativity helped Mann and his brother Heinrich come to terms with life.

In 1905, Mann married Katja Pringsheim, the only daughter of rich Jew, a mathematicism and patron of arts, who made piano transcriptions of Wagner's operas and whose palace was a gathering place of Munich artists and intellectuals. His marriage was a delightfully happy affair and he took great pride and joy in the four children that were born of it. Thomas Mann had achieved literary fame and popularity at the age of 25, with the publication of Buddenbrooks in 1901. It dealt with the themes that engrossed Mann throughout his literary career—the artist as an alien in a bourgeoise society, the increasing decadence in a family with succeeding generations, its gradual succumbing to the death-wish and the rise of a new ethos devoid of belief or morality and the consequent horrifying sense of meaningless existence. These themes took various forms in the novels and novellas that followed, prominent among them being Tristan, 1902, Tonio Kroger, 1903, Death in Venice, 1911, The Magic Mountain, 1924, Joseph and His Brothers,
Mann touched on a vein of humorous irony in The Confessions of Felix Krull Pt I, 1911 Pts II & III, 1954. It made a parodic study of genius, specifically of Goethe, in Lotte in Weimar, 1939. Mann was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1929. He was riding the crest of fame. But hard times were round the corner.

Mann was living in a time of great political happenings. He perceived in rising Nazi power the possibility of great calamity to Germany, but he continued to hope that saner influences would prevail and prevent the Nazis from coming to power. He publicly stood by German policies, though painfully aware of his novelist brother Heinrich's opposition to their country's aggressive nationalism. Mann's hopes were belied when in 1933 Hitler became Chancellor of Germany. Rabid Nazi propaganda led him to denounce Hitler's brutal pursuit of racial purity and superiority. Sensitive to his Jewish wife's predicament, he decided to seek asylum outside Germany. America and several European countries vied with one another to honour and provide a home to this pre-eminent man of letters, but Mann was restless and moved from place to place until the end of the great war saw him finally settle down in Switzerland.

Until he died in 1955, Mann made several pronouncements on his rejection of Schopenhauer, Wagner and Nietzsche and his faith in democratic humanism. As early as 1900 he wrote to Heinrich, "There is still something left in me which is not mere irony, something
which is straightforward, warm and good. No, not everything in me has been distorted, corroded, laid waste by cursed literature. Literature is death and I shall never understand how one can be enslaved by it without hating it.2

The struggle to liberate himself from the stranglehold of Nitzchean cynicism and Schopenhaurean pessimism was not easy nor entirely successful. To witness the holocaust of the II World War and the heinous crimes it begot against basic human values, to see his philosophic mentors' predictions come true and to feel in his own life, the seeds of decay take root and grow to yield fruits of despair and irony, and despite this to yearn for freedom and wholesome life: this was the basis of irony in Mann's personal life. The experience of anguish intermingled with gleanings of joy which led to dogged statements of affirmative belief in values of humanism which are scarcely borne out by the great literary masterpieces which he wrung out of his soul. But before we proceed to analyse the texts of Mann's fiction it will be in order to delineate the main tenets propagated by the four important figures who made such an impact on the vision of Thomas Mann.

Schopenhauer (1788-1860) had in his epoch-making work 'The World as Will and Idea' advanced the proposition that man is essentially driven and governed by the life force, the will which is the sum of the unconscious strivings within each of us. Schopenhauer perceived Reality as:
that Will, in the interests of which Knowledge arises, that Will which is a blind striving in whose service the slavish intellect constructs a practical and illusive world. It is a will toward no rational end. It is a blind will to live. In human beings it cloaks itself with sophistries of intellect and rational excuses. In brute and unconscious nature it operated with naked blindness. Schopenhauer finds two grounds for pessimism in the fact that the will is doomed to privation. It is striving because it is unfulfilled. Secondly where it does find fulfilment that fulfilment turns out to be illusion. Half of life is the stinging pain of frustration, the other half the dull pain of boredom. Schopenhauer is the apotheosis of romantic irony expressing a romantic disgust over a world that does not meet the needs of the assertive will and the irony of that will which finds the emptiness of what it thought it needed.

In view of the impossibility of ever satisfying the strivings of the will, Schopenhauer advised men to disassociate themselves as much as possible from the striving of the will. In the quiet contemplation of natural and artistic beauty, Schopenhauer advocated an important way of stilling the incessant drives of the will. The plastic and the literary arts hold up to the imagination and contemplation the eternal essence of nature, life and man, and thereby delivers us from involvement with the petty irritations and frustrations that arise from our dealings with individuals in our day-to-day life. But music, says Schopenhauer is an expression of the will itself, revealing the will with immediacy and urgency to itself.

In Schopenhauer's system of thought, aesthetic experience is a temporary refuge from the cycle of
anguish and frustration. Lasting relief is afforded by ascetic attainments whereby the will is denied and its imperious blind urgings subdued. At a certain point Mann departed from Schopenhauer’s line of thought to incorporate Nietzsche’s views on life and death.

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) has contributed so much to modern thought that one cannot dismiss him with neat formulations of his philosophy. Daringly provocative and different in thought he aroused intense admiration or dislike. His postulate that God is dead, was made in the 1880s in Thus Spake Zarathustra. And to him can be traced the origins of existential thought which is the basis of modern philosophy. Our interest in Nietzsche is confined to his theory about Greek civilization and his concept of the will to power as the root all human endeavour.

Nietzsche’s intention in The Birth of Tragedy (his first book) was to explain the origin of art in the imposition of form and measure (Apollo) upon the primitive emotions (Dionysus): the outcome is a species of “illusion”-masking the terrible face of reality, if the power of Dionysus over a people is very great, if, that is to say they are a ferocious and barbaric people, as Nietzsche asserted the primitive Greeks were- then if they succeeded in controlling him the result will be an art and culture of a very high and beautiful order, since the Appollonian form-giving force will have to have been even more powerful among this people than Dionysus. The closing image of the book is that of a visitor to the Greek world declaring the obviousness of this fact, and then being reminded by Aeschylus that the
message of tragedy is that both gods, Dionysus and Apollo are required for the production of this civilized beauty.6

Later Nietzsche solved the problem of science for himself on the basis of his understanding of the Greeks. 'What he asks 'is the meaning of all science?' What is the end - or worse, what is the beginning - of all science? Is the spirit of science perhaps no more than fear in the face of pessimism and flight from it? A subtle means of self-defence against - the truth?5 Nietzsche worked out that Socrates made his bizarre equation that reason - virtue happiness out of sheer fear of being overwhelmed by his passions and therefore felt an overpowering need to assert the power of rationality to an exceptional degree. Man the world over, swamped by the same fear, accepted Socrates' formula because like Socrates they sought to counter the dark desires by producing a permanent daylight — the daylight of reason.7

Human behaviour according to Nietzsche is basically motivated by the 'will to power'. This is the desire to gain not just ascendancy over others but also control over one's own unruly passions. Contrary to Schopenhauer's theory that the artist creates by effacing the will Nietzsche asserted that the artist, philosopher and saint are all exalted types of humanity because they 'embody a very strong and very highly spiritualized form of the will to power'.8 Thus the ascetic and the artist who exercise discipline over themselves, in Nietzsche's scale of values, possess a higher form of power than those
who seek to tyrannise others by virtue of their physical prowess. Nietzsche's ideal person is the total man who learns to control his rich, emotional and passionate power and channelise it into creative areas. In his later works Nietzsche discarded the dichotomy between the Dionysian and the Appolonian:

Subsequently, however, Nietzsche came to think this dualistic idea unwarrantable: the basic drives must somehow bestow form on themselves. From this there arose his conception of sublimation or self-overcoming; and when he had reduced the remaining multiplicity of drives to a single drive, which he called will to power, he was left with the monistic conception of sublimated will to power as the form-giving force; to this phenomenon he then transferred the name Dionysus, who is now the former Dionysus plus the former Apollo. In Nietzsche's later works, the 'Dionysian man' is the self-overcome man or 'superman': and his description of Goethe in fact defines what he means by 'superman' more concisely than any other passage in his works.9

Nietzsche has suffered much unwarranted criticism—spurious editing and interpolations have led to his being depicted as a waspish prophet of doom and annihilation. He did foresee the destruction of all values but it was a prelude to new values, based not on the transcendental but on the human, the only kind of reality he acknowledged and from this could be created a new society of new beings capable of happiness and fulfilment.

Mann found it convenient to marry Nietzsche's theory that any form of abnegation of will power results in
decadence to Schopenhauer's conception of the artist's creative powers as the result of the temporary negation of the will. Mann therefore embodies the artist as a figure of decadence. Out of this conception flows the whole stream of nihilistic matter that informs Mann's fiction.

Decadence is the ethos of Mann's world: the decadence that Nietzsche described as unavoidable before the generation of new values. Lingering strains of music, notably Wagner's, soothes its death - enamoured inhabitants. Mann associates music with lothary, self-indulgent sexuality and death, and uses it as "the dialectical opposite of rationality, clarity, outgoingness, life." Wagner's compositions haunt the highly enlightened and highstrung characters of the enclosed microcosm of Mann's fiction. Wagner depicted characters who were self-engrossed embodying a closed system within which emotions can enjoy only themselves. Wagner's interpretation of life and man was confirmed by his reading of Schopenhauer. In his works 'Nibelung's Ring', Tristan and Isolde and Parsifal, Wagner gave dramatic form to "the Schopenhauerean conception of the ethically reprehensible nature of the will and its 'redemption' from existence through self-knowledge. In Tristan and Parsifal the will appears at what Schopenhauer had called its most intense focal point, namely sexuality, the drive through which the will most powerfully asserts its continued existence. In these two operas, the central characters are led via the torments of sexuality to the
knowledge that the will is the source of all and that death their own death (Tristan) or the death of desire (Parsifal) which is metaphysically the same thing - is the only positive good because it is the only thing which effectively puts an end to the otherwise enduring ethical evil. In The Ring Wotan represents 'Will' and the drama lies in his slow acquisition of self-knowledge to the point at which he 'wills' his own annihilation, i.e., ceases to will.11

The heroes of Mann's books are also self-regarding: incapable of and uninterested in any outward action or relationship. Intellectually developed and highly accomplished as they are, their artistic refinement is excessive to the point of being unnaturally removed from the earthy realities of existence. But the superabundance of intellectual and artistic achievement is the direct consequence of ebbing physical vitality, the miasmic resultant of a draining life-force, whose overpowering surge to ensure identity and existence had been the basis of a healthy and normal life in times gone by. Nietzsche reads in the decadence of the modern world a steady withering of the will to live and the will to power. The nihilistic movement is merely the expression of a physiological decadence, says Nietzsche in The Will to Power.12

With the loss of Christian faith, man had to admit that the 'Higher World', the metaphysical derives from the human which is to say that the values based on anything but the human, will eventually disvalue themselves. In the 19th century Nietzsche foresaw that the idealism of mankind was on the verge of turning suddenly into
nihilism, into the belief in the absolute valuelessness i.e., meaninglessness, in the 19th century. It is this collapse of values and the consequent chaos that we are witnessing in our own times.

The pathos of nihilism - the feeling that there is no truth and no morality, and that life might as well end as go on - became a public fact in Germany during the early years of the present century. Nietzsche had written that 'man would rather will nothingness than not will' (On the Genealogy of Morals, Pt III section 25) and that a people of strong will to power deprived of satisfaction will will its own destruction rather than refrain from the exercise of the will and that was what by all appearances, it was coming to in Germany. The Reich - the 'German Empire' which was not merely an area of land and its populace but an empire of the spirit went down to moral and physical destruction unparalleled in the modern world, because it wanted to, because there was nothing left for it but to want to. Throughout this century Germany has wanted to be destroyed. This is the meaning of Hitler a nation's secret will to perish made flesh: the nihilistic pathos incarnate.13

If this is the heritage that gave impetus to Mann's writing, gave ironic flavour to his outlook on life, then one cannot be surprised by the fact that

...he writes about European men and women in a condition of physical decay and mental confusion and moral uncertainty. He depicts the decline of a family and the neurotic isolation of exceptional individuals within the normal world, he describes incest in Berlin (The Blood of Walsungs) and death in Venice and life in a Swiss sanatorium; he paints a corrupt and
darkened continent in which the only light is the light of genius and then wants us to see that this light is only phosphorescence of corruption. He is obsessed with illness..... Thomas Mann's subject is a detailed description of European nihilism.......the breakdown of European civilization as predicted and diagnosed...... by Nietzsche.  14

The fourth figure which looms in the background of Mann's intellectual life is Johann Wolfgang van Goethe (1749-1832). He precedes Schopenhauer and Nietzsche chronologically. But it is a matter of debate whether Mann proceeded from the progressive humanism of Goethe to plumb the dark night of nihilism or whether he climbed out of the abyss of a meaningless universe to achieve the kind of equilibrium and positive serenity that the Weimar philosopher preached. "I am no Goethe" said Mann in an address on the German Republic, "yet a little afar off, somehow or other I belong to his family".  15

Goethe, in his own time and in ours stands for ideas of emancipation, of human development and harmony. Advocating restraint of emotions and of excesses of judgement, he called for a positive response to life; Mann reports how the words "deserving life" which Goethe used in a poem impressed him at first reading. The concept gave him a strange sensation of being paradoxical and imposingly bold at the same time. With sarcasm turned against his own past, he says, "Here life was considered the highest achievement and to deserve it such a great distinction that it should be a protection against annihilation; that was something to confuse my youthful
conception of superiority, which rather included a refined unfitness and unsuitability for this earthly life".16

A study of Mann's attitude to Goethe as seen in Lotte in Weimar reveals a peculiarly strong desire in Mann to deride Goethe, to strip him of his deistic aura and to reduce him to something of a leering sly and autocratic genius. Goethe takes a more complicated presence in one great work, namely Joseph and his Brothers which took 16 years in the making. In this modern analysis of a Biblical story, Mann appears to be in quest for a myth relevant to a century of people who wander like cursed Cain without a home or destination. Goethe's notion of bildungsroman "the shaping of the human being through the powerful influence of admiration and love, the childlike identification with a father image elected out of profound affinity"17 seems to be at work here. How exactly did Mann attempt to delineate the great master of humanist thought? Basically he infuses in him the idea of unity, totality - "to be all-sided, to experience and contain everything ......... He refuses to take sides against one part of life on behalf of another part, he wants to accept, to refer, relate, to the whole, to shame the partisans of every principle by rounding it out and the other side too". Mann's Goethe signifies that love can encompass terror, that genius is the other side of a coin that spells criminal. Mann's Goethe is morally ambiguous, ironically detached, against fanatic nationalism and is 'an astonishing combination of versatility and the highest excellence'.18
picture of Goethe tallies, if not with the historical Goethe, with Nietzsche's evocation of the great poet and humanist:

Goethe conceived of a strong, highly cultured human being, skilled in all physical accomplishments, who keeping himself in check having reverence for himself dares to allow himself the whole compass and wealth of naturalness, who is strong enough for this freedom; a man of tolerance, not out of weakness but out of strength, because he knows how to employ to his advantage what would destroy an average nature; a man to whom nothing is forbidden, except it be weakness, whether that weakness be called vice or virtue.

In humanising Goethe, Mann provided an acceptable myth for modern man in Nietzsche's image of the superman.

Joseph and his Brothers is a happy departure to airier regions of hope but Mann came back to negotiate with subterranean forces of darkness and agony in perhaps one of the most painful creative works of our century, Doctor Faustus. He is harping on a Goethean theme but with what anguish of soul! Goethe's blithe and facile idealism in the face of the tortured existence of the twentieth century — did Mann find ways reconcile these extremes? Did Mann discover the meaning of existence or at least the basis for hope and tranquility in life? Did he discard his ironic attitude to life?: the armour of irony which protects him from pain, perhaps from life itself? Herein is the basis for the enigma of Mann's irony: Mann's irony is not the result of detachment, it is
the irony of involvement: Mann's depiction of life is not the view from the ivory tower, nor the theorising of the recondite philosopher; it is born of total submersion in the ecstasies, bitterness and ennui of life. Mann is conscious of the multifarious implications of irony. In The Magic Mountain, Settembrini, the voice of reason warns the novice Hans Castrop:

> Where irony is not a direct and classic device of oratory, not for a moment equivalent to a healthy mind it makes for depravity, it becomes a drawback to civilization, an unclean traffic with the forces of reaction, vice and materialism.20

We have attempted to define and account for Mann's outlook on life. In the following pages we shall study the creative forms Mann gave to his ironic vision.